



Dissertation Master Crossways in Cultural Narratives

**Paradoxes of Archiving Performance:
Tino Sehgal's Constructed Situations and Hans Ulrich
Obrist's Interview Project**

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Abstract

This dissertation concerns the problematic of preserving performance art. The ephemeral nature of performance challenges the way in which artworks are preserved and archived in the museum context. Besides this ontological feature of performance art, a recent trend in performance art has emerged which is capable of challenging the traditional view on and practice of the archive.

In the center of my dissertation are two series of works by Tino Sehgal and Hans Ulrich Obrist whose aesthetic strategies reveal fundamentally different attitudes towards the preservation of performance. Despite their differences however, they share an intense preoccupation with questions of documentation and archiving of the art work.

I will show how these works deal with the (un)documentation of their own work and, to a certain extent, how they self-archive themselves. More specifically, I will show how they produce an object of performance art capable of operating within the archive and thereby possibly challenging and transforming it. In essence, this dissertation will address the way in which recent performance contributes to the (re)definition of the object of performance in particular and art in general and its possible modes of existence in time and space beyond the classical understandings of both art and its afterlife.

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Chapter One

I Introduction

Over the last thirty years performance art has been more and more integrated into art programs whether in museums, galleries or cultural centers. Besides already existing performances being shown, new works of art were commissioned for the program of exhibitions or as an individual show in the museum or gallery space. At least since the late 1970s, performance became an essential part of theater and dance festivals and with the beginning of the 21st century of all kinds of interdisciplinary festivals across and even beyond the field of the arts.

Analysing these art programs and curatorial works helps us to understand in which way performance aesthetics has been approached and eventually framed by aesthetic and cultural institutions. These approaches resulted from experiencing performance art events and writing about the material preserved in the aftermath of these events, such as texts, tape- and video-recordings, photographs etc. Academic scholarship and the work of artists and curators who exhibited or adapted these works in new contexts helped further to shape these approaches.

A quite recent interest in performance art as a field of study has provoked many scholars to think about the problem of its preservation. Addressing the problematic of the documentation of the event or the elaboration of material that comes out of these events, most studies call for a temporal approach to performance art. Are the traces left by the performance capable to extend its performativity? Is presentification the most important or even the exclusive factor at stake in the performative event? If not, what could be the role of past and future in regards to the performative moment? These debates can be located either in museological

and academic contexts or in artistic practice as such. This dissertation will consider recent performance practice in regards to this problematic.

I will analyze two series of works that challenge the way in which the history of performance has been written. The first series is called *Constructed Situations*, the ensemble of the work of performance artist Tino Sehgal. The second is entitled *Interview Project* which is a monumental project of interviews with all kinds of cultural workers realized by the curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist. Both projects have been running for a long period of time; *Constructed Situations* since 1999 and *Interview Project* since the beginning of the 1990. Although both artists don't claim their work to be framed within the scope of performance art, both works will be considered here as performances. What these projects have in common is a very intense preoccupation with their documentation and preservation. However, the works take on radical different ways to document their work; while Tino Sehgal prohibits all kind of documentation of his performances, Hans-Ulrich Obrist documents his own events while he is performing, transforming this documentation into new objects that become part of his work.

In my analysis, I will look at the way in which both works challenge the archive, arguing that more than just participating in the process of archiving, both works aesthetics' take as an integral part of their work a proposal of a new way of archiving. I will try to proof that both works may contribute to a new definition of the ontology of performance, which includes a broader definition of its central object (the actual performance as event) – an object that can exist and operate within the archive.

Assuming these possibilities is to position my argument against what has been argued to be the only ontological truth of performance art – that it exists merely in the present moment and that its ephemeral material results from nothing else but the 'encounter' between human bodies.

Using the critical contributions by Paul Auslander, Amelia Jones and Rebecca Schneider, I will argue that performance art remains in its traces. To circumstantiate this point further I will draw from the recent proposition of André Lepecki and Adrian Heathfield that the object of performance art doesn't become death after its fact-ness.

The dissertation is divided in three chapters. Chapter one deploys in a broader perspective the characteristics of the recent move of performance art towards the archive. It also introduces crucial notions of performance theory that will be used in this dissertation as well as references to the authors and concepts that will be used. Chapter two focuses on the analysis of the series of artworks by Sehgal and Obrist. The analysis of these works is in itself divided into three parts. The first part undertakes a thick description of the works in relation to the topic of performance preservation. The second is an investigation of their specific aesthetic strategies. My aim here will be to show how the ethical implications on the documentation of their work contribute to the discussion on preserving and collecting performance art. The third is a provisional conclusion on the new ways of archiving both projects propose.

In the last chapter, I will compare how both works extend themselves into their afterlives. I will propose that both works project the afterlives of their object into the archive as a way of challenging the institutional boundaries that involve selection, organization, archiving and, ultimately, the making of performance history.

In essence, what will be proposed in this dissertation is a revaluation of the "object of performance art" by understanding the way in which this object, in these two series of works, is capable to contribute actively to the making of its own history.

II The Will to Archive ¹

From the manifold examples, I will only mention two to argue for the relevance of the high contemporary interest in preserving performance. Since 2008, the American choreographer Julie Tolentino has been performing the ongoing project “The Sky Remains the Same,” a performance that consists of re-enactments of past performances. Tolentino invites the authors of the works she wants to reproduce and asks them to teach her how to perform them, in order to “archive” their works in her own body. She has been reproducing works of the artists Ron Athey, Franco B, David Rousseve and David Dorffman. In 2011, Sara Wookey founded “reDance”, a platform that functions as an archive of re-enacted works of renowned choreographers of the Judson Dance Theatre era, performed by another generation of dance artists. This platform harbors live performances, workshops and discussions with the aim of keeping some sort of archival practice ‘alive’. Tackling the question of preserving performance in different ways, these examples reveal what André Lepecki characterizes to be the “will to archive”.

In the last twenty years, the wish to preserve “live art” has become more explicit among performance artists. Also, more recently, an increasing number of festivals and conferences have been dedicated to the practice of re-enactments and performances addressing the archive. Some examples are the ongoing research project in Tate Modern entitled “Performance at Tate, Collecting, Archiving and Sharing Performance and the Performative” as well as New Museum's cycle of conferences and presentations in 2012 called “Performance Archiving Performance” and even the Kaai Theater Festival in Brussels which typically assembles the international avant-garde

¹ Notion proposed by André Lepecki in the essay “Body as Archive: Will to re-enact and Afterlives of Dances”, *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 42, 2010

in performative arts, dedicated in 2010 a whole issue of the festival, entitled “Re:Move”, to re-enactments of dance and performance.

This turn towards the archive in performance art has triggered a self-archiving trend, which over the last years has become more and more recognized as an art practice in itself. This kind of practice, as can be seen in the two examples given above, explores new ways of understanding the archive and, more importantly, ask the questions of how and why performance should be technologically documented, critically described and physically stored as an archival material.

Maybe more than other art forms, performance art has the ability to complicate the writing of art history due to its strong dependence on physical and mental remnants such as documentation, archives and memories. Frequently, the fragility and ephemerality of these remnants call into question the possibility of archiving the work. As Amelia Jones argues in ‘Unpredictable Temporalities: Body and Performance in Art History’, performance has the potential to “put pressure on how we write history, which has conventionally depended on the predictability of static objects that are neatly archived, on display, in order to be viewed and evaluated.”² In opposition to other art forms that produce ‘graspable’ art objects that can be easily selected and arranged in an archive, performance art produces an ephemeral, slippery object, which makes its classification and therefore its archiving difficult and often at first sight impossible.

Often seen as a repository of memories and, in the context of art, as a repository of bodies of work, the archive, has been more broadly seen as a memorial of our culture. As Derrida proposes in his famous essay “Archive Fever” (1994), the word archive, in its origin, corresponds to the Greek

² Amelia Jones, “Unpredictable Temporalities, The Body and Performance in Art History” in *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance*, University of Copenhagen: Museum of Tusculanum, 2013, 53

word ‘arkheion’, which means a house or domicile and refers to the superior’s magistrate residence.³ There, the magistrate, the anchor himself, exercised his power over documents, his right to interpret them within clearly defined systems of law.⁴ The definition of the archive in this etymological sense evokes an act of “domiciliation”, house arrest. What has questioned by performance artists, in regards to the processes involving the archivation of performance art, is the way in which this ‘act of domiciliation’ has been performed by institutions. Since the object of performance art, being in its ontological definition an object that ‘disappears’, runs the risk to be subjected to a predetermined cultural habituation of the logic of the archive.⁵

As Derrida interestingly argues towards the end of his essay, the function of the archive has produced what he calls the ‘archive fever’. ‘Archive Fever’, or in French, ‘mal d’archive’ means to “suffer from a sickness of run after the archive”.⁶ In other words, the need to produce always new demands for archives, ‘even if there is too much of it’. This contribution of Derrida may help us understand why performance artists, in order to answer to the problem of archiving performance, have started to create aesthetics that involve the creation of processes of preservation. In evoking the “archive fever”, Derrida refers to a kind of social pathology of archiving from which our society can no longer escape. In ‘Archaeology of Knowledge’ Michel Foucault had already observed that no matter what dependence we have created with the archive: memories and its content have become “an unavoidable element in our thought.” Derrida’s and

³ The word is also associated to the word ‘anchors’, which refer to those that have a signified power to select what should not be saved or what should be forgotten.

⁴ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 2002, 1

⁵ Rebecca Schneider’s proposal in the beginning of the article “Performance Remains”, *A Journal of Performing Arts*, August, 2014.

⁶ Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression, *Diacritics*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Summer, 1995, 6

Foucault's thoughts tell us that no matter what we do, we cannot avoid the archive, because we all suffer from its 'sickness'.

In the younger history of performance, a huge quantity of works can be found in which artists appropriate, interpret and interrogate archival structures; either by playing with archival mechanisms and reinventing ways of archiving or by questioning the way in which past performance works have been historicized.

III The Paradoxes of the Present

In the last forty years, much ink has been spilled on the question of the ontology of performance. One of the most remarkable contributions to its ontological definition is Peggy Phelan's work 'Unmarked: The Politics of Performance' (1993) where she claims, according to the temporality of performance art, that "performance's only live is in the present".⁷

Historically, in performance theory, the 'present moment' has been seen as the crucial element that constitutes its present and consequently, as one of the principal aesthetic features of performance. Since "presence", or the 'present moment' in the context of theatre, performance and visual arts, has been associated with the practices of encounter (between the artist or the artwork and the observer), the concept in itself has been foregrounding the idea that performance belongs to a single temporality – the present. This emphasis on a single temporality, in the context of performance art, is extended, not only to the event, but to the object itself; which, accordingly, would "exist" only in the 'present moment'.⁸ This idea implies that both object and event in time happen in a single event in space. In other words, once the event and object extinguish themselves in time, they equally do so

⁷ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, New York, Routledge, 1993, 146

⁸ "Present moment" has been understood to be the moment in which presence is delivered, from the artist to the beholder or vice versa.

in space. If we were to apply this idea in more practical terms in respect to the persistence of performance in space, this means that the traces left by a performance (after the occurred event, after the present) are not considered to be part of the event, since they do not belong to the single, vanishing moment of the present.

However, over the last years, many attempts to contest the ontology of performance in the sense of this definition have been raised. Recently, the idea that elements and traces left by a performance that occurred in the past have the potential to continue its performativity, have been widely emphasized. For example, the criticism of Philip Auslander and Amelia Jones of the assumption that performances only exist during the present live-act that includes the presence of bodies, have been important in order to advance the possibility that performance may exist in other temporalities.

Against Phelan, Auslander proposes that the material traces of the event can be seen as material performativity capable of reproducing itself as a performative event. When criticizing Phelan's definition of performance ontology, Auslander argues against the idea of a unique single moment in performance art that resists its reproduction. He presents his argument by identifying the mediatized theatre and performance of the 1980s and 1990s, in which the more recent media explore processual understandings of practice of presence by simulating experiences of presence.

Amelia Jones added further critiques against the present as the only temporality of performance. Focusing on a revival move towards the ephemeral artworks characterized by 'live art'⁹ at the beginning of the 21st century, Jones characterizes this recent aesthetics as an onset of what she calls the 'impossibility of presence'. In the essay 'Artist is Present: the Re-enactment and the Impossibility of Presence', she argues that the pressure towards 'presentness' in live art has been inviting artists and curators to

⁹ Defined by Adrian Heathfield in *Live: Art and Performance*, 2004

produce and re-enact works with the aim of emphasizing the presence of the live body as its principal aesthetic possibility. She takes the example of Marina Abramovic's exhibition in Moma 2012, where Abramovic presented a retrospective of her work started in the 1970's by simultaneously re-enacting her performances and presenting her new work. The new work was the (already legendary) performance 'The Artist is Present', where Abramovic presented herself in the gallery of the Museum of Modern Art (2012) during the opening hours of the museum, seated at a table waiting for the audience to sit down at the same table to 'engage with her live-ness'¹⁰ (interact with her). The ultimate goal of this exhibition was, according to Jones, to celebrate the presence of the artist, underlying that the presence of the body is the only possible ontological truth of performance. As Jones argues, the exhibition apparatus promoted by the museum and the social media before, during and after the exhibition was somehow contradictory to the 'presentness' claimed by the creators of the performance. The photographs, videos, interviews and later the documentary about the making of the exhibition are part of the documentation on the event that helped to "to spread Abramovic's presence to the world".¹¹

There are two dimensions here at stake. The first, more abstract, is related to the persistence of performance in time. The other, more concrete, has to do with the persistence of performance in space. The two are intertwined with each other; no performance persists in time without persisting in space and the other way around. The contributions of both, Auslander and Jones, state that performance persists in its traces, and these

¹⁰ Amelia Jones, "The Artist is Present: Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence," *The Drama Review*, Volume 55, Spring 2011, 17

¹¹ Jones, "The Artists is Present", 17.

are capable to reproduce its performativity as well as to deliver again the so-called 'present moment' to the observer.

The paradox of the present lies in the intersection between space and time that performance is depended on to exist. In other words, if we were to believe that the traces of performance are a significant part of its existence, we must also somehow assume that performance has a past (an after the event). While Auslander argues that both actual performance and its remains deliver performativity, continuing "alive", Jones goes even further, arguing that what is claimed to be 'presence' as the single element of the present, has been corrupted by the postmodern revival of theatrical aesthetics' need to turn the 'present moment' into a commodity. In this way, the materials produced in relation to the piece that carried performativity, is disavowed as constitutive material of the performance.

Both considerations help us understand that the paradox of present is related on the one hand to the belief that the instant that it concerns can only happen in the 'present moment', and on the other with the fact that it is the performance's fact-ness only which takes place in the encounter between 'living bodies'. By emphasizing this paradoxical dimension, both scholars show us that 'presence' doesn't necessarily happen in the present, and also doesn't necessarily happen in a single space.

In conclusion, the various theories that compromise the definition of performance with that of durability in time often overlook its relationship with space. Thinking of performance in terms of what remains of it, represents a proposal that foregrounds the emphasis on performance's past signs and traces as part of its performativity and material history that can be brought to the present.

In the following chapter, I will turn my attention to the two series of works that form the main object of my dissertation: Tino Sehgal's *Constructed Situations* and Hans Ulrich Obrist's *Interview Project*. Keeping

in mind what has been elaborated so far, the archival trend in contemporary performance and the paradoxical status of the present and presence in the history of performance art, I will try to show that both works make a case against 'presence' as the unique and exclusive feature of the present in which these artworks come to existence.

Chapter Two

I Constructed Situations

Tino Sehgal's *Constructed Situations* consists of a number of performances that are all based on a specific combination of circumstances (that he refers to as a situation). With a group of interpreters, he produces an ephemeral piece presented in the space of the museum. He describes himself as a constructor of situations and also as a choreographer that exhibits in museums. He claims as his materials the human voice, language, movement, and interaction. Sehgal's work resists the production of physical objects. The refusal of any kind of documentation is part of the aesthetics of his work. Believing that visual documentation, such as photographs and video records, can never capture the live experience, Sehgal produces works with no documentation.

His work can be seen from various perspectives. If we look at the title *Constructed Situations*, we are inevitably reminded of one of the seminal texts of the Situationist International: *Report on the Construction of Situations*. Written by Guy Debord in 1958, the text explores the way in which a situation should be created. Despite considering themselves an artistic avant-garde, SI rejected the idea of art as aesthetic experimentation. Part of the SI rejection of art was related to their members' belief that artworks had become commodities and therefore part of the spectacle. Instead, the Situationists wanted to give art a new purpose as a vehicle for

the transformation of everyday life. They were convinced that art should only exist for the purpose of social and political change. “There is not Situationist art, but there is Situationist use of art.”¹²

Despite this controversial relationship to art, Situationist practices were developed out of Dada and Surrealist experiments.¹³ It is commonly agreed that the SI continued the avant-garde explorations and their artistic methods, with techniques such as *dérive* and *détournement*. The first, *dérive*, (Fig. 1) or drifting, consists in random walks around cities in which each performer searches for aleatory stimuli affecting their itinerary. The second, *détournement*, (Fig. 2) consists in the refusal of original creations and in the belief that everything that can be done and said has to be reinvention or reinterpretation. These practices were fundamental for the foregrounding of aesthetic possibilities in performance art in the 1960s, the 1970s and later.

In Sehgal’s work, we can observe the direct influence of these two practices. *Dérive* can be found in the training of his interpreters that are asked to constantly re-map the performative event as it unfolds. The stimuli given by the audience and the atmosphere of the space guide their actions. *Détournement* is related to Sehgal’s quotidian aesthetics and his emphasis on everyday gestures, clothes and movements as the basis of his choreographic creation. Historically, this can be related to several groups such as Judson Dance and Steve Paxton, and also Allan Kaprow events, the so-called ‘Happenings’.¹⁴

¹² Guy Debord, “Report on the Construction of Situations”, in *Situation*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2005, 112

¹³ As Claire Bishop makes clear in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, in reality, the relationship of SI to art was not always clear. The first phase from 1957-62 is commonly agreed to be the period when the group was most sympathetic to art. But after 1962 until the end of the group in 1972, the group became increasingly opposed to art.

¹⁴ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London, 2012, 175.

If we look at the beginning of Guy Debord's text *Report on the Construction of Situations*, we can understand the similarities between the Situationists' and Sehgal's situations:

"The construction of situations begins beyond the ruins of the modern spectacle. It is easy to see how much the very principle of the spectacle – non-intervention – is linked to the alienation of the old world. [...] The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part 'public' must constantly diminish, while that played by those cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term 'livers', must steadily increase."¹⁵

If we substitute *modern spectacle* for museum at the beginning of the quote, we might uncover the function of Sehgal's appropriation of Situationist situations. Both aim towards *steadily increasing* the participation of the audience. Both claim that a situation should be played by its own constructors, thereby avoiding the separation between performers and audience. In *Constructed Situations*, the barrier between interpreters and audience is almost imperceptible. This separation is instead between the ones familiar with the situation and the ones who are dealing with the situation for the first time. Such is the case of *These Associations* (Fig. 3) performed for the first time at Tate Modern, London, in 2012. This piece consists of more than fifty interpreters of different ages arranged in the space, acting as if they were visitors. In an intriguing way, they are all choreographed. Only after some time, we understand that there is a pattern in the way they move through the space. This pattern is not fixed in

¹⁵ Debord, *Constructed Situations*, 110.

advance, but works as a game with certain rules the interpreters have to follow. These rules work as a set of instructions:

“I set up these virtual games with relatively simple rules in which a group of individuals have to work together. It is not like they are all marching in one direction. It is more like football.”¹⁶

These instructions play out on a large scale in the space of the museum. This interest for games can also be found in what Debord calls playfulness. Justifying his way of constructing situations, he criticizes industrial design's preference for functionalist products and forwards the disruptive quality of playfulness:

“In our time, functionalism (an inevitable expression of technological advance) is attempting entirely to eliminate play. The partisans of industrial design complain that their objects are spoiled by people's playful tendencies. (...) The only progressive way out is to liberate the tendency toward play elsewhere, and on a larger scale.”¹⁷

Debord argues that the only way to fight against the commodification of goods is to create situations that could “promote experimental forms of a game of revolution”.¹⁸ For the SI, the work on situations was primarily conceived to find new types of playfulness and interaction in order to diminish the power of the entertainment of visual images that, according to them, was causing alienation in mass culture.

¹⁶ Tino Sehgal. Interview with S.T. The Economist, July, 2012.

¹⁷ Debord, *Constructed Situations*, 111, 112

¹⁸ Debord, *Constructed Situations*, 112.

Sehgal's work exposes a similar ability to produce and deproduce itself. Deproduction is not just an external factor, but an essential element of the artwork.

When asked about the relation of his work to deproduction, Sehgal said in an interview with Tim Griffin for *Artforum*:

“The reason I am interested in the transformation of actions and the simultaneity of production and deproduction is because I think that the appearance in Western societies in the twentieth century of both an excess supply of the goods that fulfill the basic human needs and mankind's endangering of the specific disposition of “nature” in which human life seem possible renders the hegemony of the dominant mode of production questionable (...) How could we produce things that, on the one hand, aren't problematic and, on the other, are more interesting or complex, or less static.”¹⁹

By rejecting the term performance to describe his work, Sehgal sees his work rather as visual art, since it is presented in galleries and museums and accessible at the same opening times as other visual art exhibitions. His insistence on creating an ephemeral object that is conceived and presented as a visual artwork is in itself a gesture of reconfiguration of the frame of the museum. But Sehgal's gesture goes beyond questioning the aesthetic frame of the museum. In his two works *This is Good* (2001) and *This is Right*, (2003) Sehgal questions the role of the museum and its relationship with the art market. In the first performance, the title, ironically, focuses attention on the trend of performative events in museums. The audience is taken by surprise in the exhibition space when the museum guards start to

¹⁹ Tino Sehgal. Interview with Tim Griffin, *Artforum*, 2012

perform a vivid, synchronized dance. The second one, performed at Frieze Artfair London, consists of two children presenting Tino Sehgal's works available for purchase. They show the pieces and deliver some information about them, such as date, edition number, price and also “*every now and then they flashed with a bit of art-critical terminology.*”²⁰ Focusing on the relationship between museum and art market in the piece *This is Exchange* (2003), presented at the Venice Biennale 2005, Sehgal and his interpreters confronted the visitors with the offer to be asked several questions about the art market and to get paid for their answers. The visitors could then choose to answer or not, but nothing beyond the conversation between interpreters and visitors is shown. In that way, the expected roles are inverted and the visitors take on the roles of consultants. As Sehgal notes, the audience is “paid a certain amount if they deliver a product. The product is that they tell their opinion on market economy. They are not opposite of an object which they can then interpret or be subject towards.”²¹

Sehgal's resistance to the production of objects is not necessarily related to a resistance to the commodification of goods, although it may appear this way in a first reading of his work. Sehgal's work is undocumented and its lack of documentation is part of the work itself. His refusal of pictures, film and curatorial texts or any other kind of reproduction is an integral part of the aesthetic features of his work. He claims to have the memory of his work ‘marked’ in the participants’ bodies and memories.

In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), Peggy Phelan argues that performance in its strict ontological sense is non-reproductive.

²⁰ Claire Bishop, “No Picture Please: The Art of Tino Sehgal”, *Artforum*, May 2005

²¹ Tino Sehgal, Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Interview Project, Volume II, 838.

"Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation or representations of representation: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance." ²²

Peggy Phelan's contribution to the research on the preservation of performance art is concerned with the ethical implications of writing about ephemeral events. Phelan suggests that the performative event only exists whilst it is happening. According to Phelan, the challenge for the art historian when writing on performance art is to try to re-mark the event in the writing itself. In this way, the act of writing is coherent with the disappearance of the object, instead of simulating its preservation. She underlines that we must remember that the 'after-effect of disappearance is the experience of subjectivity itself.' The disappearance is accounted for as a part of the performative event and the vehicle that translates its absence into subjectivity.

Tino Sehgal's work has as its fundamental element a magnetic relation between the present and the future. The disappearance of the artwork is bound up with its performative moment. As Sehgal argues in an interview, his work produces and deproduces itself. The visibility that Sehgal gives to its disappearance is revealed through the discontinuity of the object in its reproduction. In this way, he is like the art historian. However, in a completely different way, Sehgal builds an archive of his work by encouraging the audience to continue the performance in their memories of the event.

²² Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*, 148.

The impulse towards the integration of these features and experiences into artwork is already evident in the earliest works of Sehgal. One of his earliest performances is *Twenty Minutes for the Twenty Century* (1999) where he performed naked and in chronological succession the birth and history of modern dance by re-enacting signature movements of twenty important choreographers. This dimension of Sehgal's artistic contribution can also be seen in the works *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing Bruce and Dan and other things* (2000) and *Kiss* (2002). In *Instead of allowing*, one dancer repeatedly executes the same movements incorporating the movement from Dan Graham's dual-screen Super-8 projection *Roll*, 1970, and Bruce Nauman's videos *Tony Sinking into the Floor, Face up and Face Down* and *Elke Allowing the Floor to Rise Up over Her, Face Up*, both from 1973. *Kiss* (Fig. 4) is a sculptural work of two interpreters that are re-enacting the moment before and after a kiss, eventually resembling embracing couples from historical works of art such as Auguste Rodin's, *The Kiss* (1889), Constantin Brâncusi's *The Kiss* (1908), Gutstav Klimt's (1907-8) and various Gustave Coubert paintings from the 1860s.

Sehgal does the opposite of what Peggy Phelan suggests. In these two works, he uses non-performative art such as painting and film in order to restage their inherent performative possibilities. By subverting the material possibilities of these works, he exposes what they cannot offer: the performative quality of the situation they suggest.

Analysing the work of Sehgal, we are tempted to read it only from the perspective of a desire for a regime of total immateriality. But contrary to the politics of dematerialization of the late 1960s, where the production of immaterial artworks was considered an escape from art's

relationship to the market and the museum, Sehgal does not attempt to protect his work from being sold or shown in spaces other than museums or galleries. His relationship with aesthetic institutions is one of extreme proximity. His ultimate aim is to work with existing conditions and conventions and challenge them from the inside.

II Expanded Situation

In order to understand this dimension of Sehgal's work, we have to look more closely at his aesthetic strategy. As I have said, Sehgal adopts and articulates the SI techniques by integrating them in the space of the museum. As Jessica Morgan, the curator of The Dakaslopous Collection in Tate Modern said in the context of the opening of his exhibition in 2012: "People will be doing things with their body, in parallel with what is going on in the city."²³

Just like the SI proposed to do in their practice of *dérive*, Sehgal tries to grasp the environment of the exhibition space and use what happens spontaneously inside that space as material that constitutes his *situations*. Just like the practitioners of the *dérive*, his interpreters are told to be extremely attentive to the stimulus given by everything that is implicated in the situation, such as the particular space, the presence and behaviour of the viewers and the general environment and atmosphere generated by their movement. Thus, their task is to integrate and potentiate that stimulus by letting it transform and eventually conduct the situation. *These Associations* is a good example of the environment established in the museum works as a 'nourishing structure' of the situation and, therefore, of the event. The piece was performed in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern in London, where a

²³ Tate Modern. "Unilever Series Tino Sehgal" <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-tino-sehgal-2012>, Last Access 16 June, 2016.

variety of these stimuli were constantly being integrated in the on-going performance. The integration of these stimuli occurs with the simple gesture of the interpreters capturing the information of the ambience in the hall. According to the space, its architecture and its functionality as a transit space, many of these ‘stimuli’ came from the crowds queuing to enter the museum, the gatherings of students and tourists that spent their time at the entrance of the museum and the visitors that came to see the piece. Together, these groups form an unexpected flux of people. The dynamics created by that flux (velocity, quality of movement etc.) of the bodies and objects that make up this situation (which has been established in the forefront of the performance) are what constitute the materiality and even the *objecthood* of the work. It is important to note that human bodies (and what they do) are what Sehgal considers the material of his work, so this flux of people that is constantly moving in and out of the gallery of the museum is maybe the central element of his performance.

“As my work evolves, it is much more about creating a common situation between the visitor or the viewer. Of course the situation is initiated by people doing things. The ontological status of going to say the same...but it’s oscillating between almost being the same and being different. The more my work evolves, maybe the visitor even knows more about it, has more power over how the piece will develop then even the interpreters” Tino Sehgal ²⁴

At a first glance, Sehgal’s work might seem to subscribe to the premises of relational aesthetics, since his first concern is the relationship established between interpreters and audience. But, contrary to what Nicolas Bourriaud argues in *Relational Aesthetics*, where he proposes a

²⁴ Tino Sehgal, Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Interview Project, Volume II, 839

new idea of form that is created in the dimension of inter-personal relationships,²⁵ Sehgal is searching for a form that emerges from within a situation. Thereby, instead of producing an ‘encounter’, a term often used in theatre and performance theory, referring primarily to the encounter between human beings, Sehgal designs a ‘situation’ in which several relational spheres can be included. Thus, instead of merely using the (inter-human) encounter as an aesthetic possibility, Sehgal explores the aesthetics of the (more-than-human) situation. Although Sehgal’s situations take place inside the museum, they open themselves up to various other spheres including the general space and environment, the stable and transitory objects surrounding the interpreters and even the mostly hidden infrastructure of the museum. In other words, Sehgal’s piece reaches out to that which conditions and affects the piece from outside: the space and environment where it is presented, the interaction of human bodies and objects and ultimately the structure of the institution, its institutional setting and its organizational system.

What seems to be a frameless strategy at first, glance, is a conscious construction of an artificial frame, a constructed situation, that challenges the institutional frame. Here a parallel could be made to the work of Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, in which he creates a model to observe the accepted social entities, such as the relations between individuals and total institutions. For Goffman, frames are the principals of organization governing events. Sehgal’s situations show a great similarity with Goffman's frames. On the one hand, they question the nature of relationships between individuals and institutions, on the other hand, they preestablish stable rules that govern the way in which

²⁵ As Bourriaud argues, it is an art form “which takes being together as a central theme, the “encounter“ between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning.” *Relational Aesthetics*, Presses du Réel, 2002, 15

the events come to existence.

As suggested in the title of this chapter, I would like to introduce the idea of an expanded situation into the context of Sehgal's work as his central aesthetic strategy.

In *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, the art historian Rosalind Krauss developed the concept of an 'expanded field' by exploring how the concept of sculpture as an art form has been changing over the years. The essay, published in *October* in 1979, explores the intersections between visual art, architecture and landscape. Krauss reads these intersections through a diagram (Fig.5) that problematizes the classical definition of sculpture by re-defining it by its 'negative condition'. She writes: "Sculpture has become what it is not, this way being simply determinate by 'what is in the room that is not really the room'".²⁶

According to Sehgal, the term performance suggests a formal separation between artwork and audience, which is the reason why he prefers to call his works sculptures, installations or situations. If we consider Sehgal's work a sculpture, as the artist himself suggests, we can understand how it sets its conditions both in time and space to reach out into an expanded field. But what kind of expanded field could Sehgal have in mind? Using Krauss's diagram, we can consider the bodies of the interpreters of *Constructed Situations* as a relatively permanent sculpture; the space where the performance takes place is the equivalent of the actual architecture; and the bodies of the interpreters can be understood as the visitors to a landscape which in this case would be a landscape made up of human beings. Just like the example of Krauss's new sculptural modality, which in order to persist asserts itself by negating the modalities of architecture and landscape, Sehgal's sculpture, although ultimately

²⁶ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", *October*, Vol. 8, Spring 1979, 42

ephemeral, can also be defined by its negative conditions regarding the architectural setting (museum space) and the human landscape (bodies of all the participants).²⁷ Paradoxically, as Krauss argues and Sehgal illustrates, the mutual exclusion of sculpture and architecture, on the one hand, and sculpture and landscape on the other, can easily be transformed into similarities. As Krauss writes:

“The expanded field is thus generated by problematizing the set of oppositions between which the modernist category sculpture is suspended. And once this has happened, once one is able to think one’s way into this expansion.”²⁸

Krauss summarizes this change as a passage from modernist tradition to postmodernism. Towards the end of her essay, she characterizes this change as a rupture of the cultural field. She writes:

“In order to name this historical rupture and the structural transformation of the cultural field that characterizes it, one must have recourse to another term. The one already use in other areas of criticism is postmodernism.”²⁹

The expanded field Krauss proposes, which characterizes the domain of postmodernism, has as its concern the diverse practices and the mediums used by the artists.

In *Art and the Objecthood*, published in 1967 in *Artforum*, Michael Fried already attempted to rethink sculpture by understanding the language

²⁷ The piece is not entirely sustained in the place where it occurs neither in the human bodies of the audience, it appears in correlation with these two elements.

²⁸ Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, 42.

²⁹ Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, 43.

that had been used to define it and the criteria that had been used to determine its aesthetic norms. In his essay, Fried criticizes the objecthood of minimalist art by forwarding the existence of a theatrical sphere around the object that is 'concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work'.³⁰ In this sense, what Sehgal proposes by including the beholder actively in the elaboration of his piece and by setting up the circumstances for this encounter, is very similar to what minimalist artists were attempting in the mid 1970s. The theatrical sphere that is pejoratively highlighted by Fried also proposes an expanded field that emerged together with the establishment of conceptual and minimalist art.

Whereas Krauss tries to (positively) liberate sculpture from the modernist attempt to enclose it within a specific category, Fried (negatively) highlights minimalist art's attempt to expand itself into the sphere of the beholder. Both attempts to re-define sculpture are based on the idea of expansion that can help us understand the expanded situation at stake in Sehgal's work. As argued at the beginning, Sehgal uses Guy Debord's instructions to construct a situation, which consists of a set of circumstances around which the event is initiated and consequently performed. Sehgal expands his work into the exhibition room, a practice which virtually ties together the two versions of expansion proposed by Krauss and Fried.

On the first level of expansion, Sehgal includes both the physical site where the piece is performed and the beholder of the event who is gradually implicated in the construction of the piece. But there is more at stake in his proposition to construct a situation. Following SI legacy, his situational aesthetics design a set of circumstances that regulate not only

³⁰ Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 1967, in *Art and Objecthood*. Chicago: University Press, 1998, 153

what can happen inside the exhibition room, but also the range of possibilities concerning the work's reception and its classification by the hosting institution.

The art critic Agnieszka Gratza describes the various modalities of 'expansion art' that appeared since the avant-garde in the course of the 20th century. In her review of the exhibition "Expanded Performance", presented by the Dutch Center for Art and Architecture Stroom Den Haag in 2012, she argues that the term has mostly been associated with the inclusion of 'live elements', such as in Stan VanDerBeek's 'expanded cinema' where multimedia projections and video art installations substitute traditional projections. In Gratza's view, the inclusion of live elements associated to the expansion tends, paradoxically, to narrow the medium's possibilities instead of challenging and expanding them. Consequently, she proposes another notion of 'expanded art'. Believing that performance art is still one of the most eclectic and malleable art forms, the task of her 'expanded performance' is to actively redefine the exhibition space and its institutional frame. As she writes:

"Expanded Performance sets itself as a goal to do away with the historical fetish of the live event and to propose new forms of performance in which the body is no longer central, the artist's body at any rate. The objects themselves redefine the institution's living space, and not just the designed exhibition rooms, in such a way as to invite, or forcedly elicit the same form of performance from visitors and staff alike."³¹

³¹ In the end of her review she gives the example of Tino Sehgal's work as an expanded performance.

Gratza's comment raises two important issues regarding the expansion of performance art, both in space and time. Her reconceptualization of 'expanded performance' takes into account the performativity of the traces and the documentation left behind by the live event. To a greater extent, it also admits and welcomes the possibility of performances being archived. This extension into the archive, the possibility of a performative afterlife of the performative event, is accompanied by the extension of the performance into the institutional frame. Affirming that there is such a thing as performativity in performance art that transcends the exhibition room and enters the institution's living space, she also intimates that the performative object can undoubtedly reach and transform the aesthetic institutions by articulating their infrastructural modalities. In this sense, contrary to the other two notions of expanded art uncovered by Fried and Krauss, 'expanded performance' seems to cover another important aspect that is related to the way in which the piece affects its hosting institution.

In line with Gratza's argument, Sehgal expands his situational aesthetics by provisioning the way in which the work is received by the institution. As I have already mentioned, the materiality of his work comes into 'action' in two phases: the phase of production and the phase of deproduction. Production means the phase in which the work is being concretized (the actual performance), deproduction the phase in which it disappears (the end of the performance and its possible afterlife). It is in this act of deproduction that Sehgal doubtlessly expands his work beyond the gallery of the museum.

A central part of his aesthetics is the rigorous non-documentation of the work, which creates a total absence of the object (or with a more Situationist turn of phrase: the spectacle of the object). Nevertheless, the

disappearance of the physical object and the refusal to record it with technology cunningly creates an expansion into the infrastructure of the museum. An explanation is needed to make this point more visible.

The rules that are set up in the forefront of the performance not only condition the actual performative event, but simultaneously articulate the future preservation of the work. This anticipatory aesthetic move forces the hosting institution to redefine its functioning. For instance, it has to think of other ways of promoting the work and communicating its content to the public since they are not allowed to use any documentary material (such as photographs, trailers, etc.). The refusal of documentation also complicates the way in which Sehgal can sell his work. The purchase of his pieces is anything but simple. Nothing can be documented on paper. In an interview with the curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist about the purchase of *Kiss* by Moma³² in 2012, he describes how the transaction was conducted verbally by a lawyer, in the presence of Sehgal, his interpreters, and two Moma curators.³³ The conditions about the re-installation of the work were articulated loudly and committed to memory.

Since Sehgal sells his work, his intention is not to escape the market. Rather, he aims to articulate a way in which he can participate in the creation of rules for the art field in the future. Sehgal's experimental performances address many debates that surround and influence current museum practices. One of his concerns is to centre his practice on the viewers' experience, but contrary to the practices of the 1960s that aimed to

³² "We don't get anything. We don't get a contract, we don't get a certificate, we are not even allowed to take a photograph of it", as Klaus Biesenbach, Chief Curator of the Department of Media and Performance Art at MOMA said.

³³ Similarly, Yves Klein in the work "Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility," (1959) sold empty space (the immaterial zone) to various collectors. To complete the transaction, Klein exchanged the purchase amount for gold leaf, which he tossed into the Seine. The collector then burned the receipt, leaving no record of the transaction. Some photographs contradictorily remain as documentary evidence.

produce an object that would resist the art market by “stopping to exist” after its production, Sehgal’s contribution to the art museum debates of the twenty-first century goes beyond critical gesture, and instead leans towards finding alternatives.

Sehgal's aesthetic situation works towards modifying the affective, perceptual and conceptual possibilities of the archive. His performances foreground and generate social relations that create the archive of his pieces and are able to synthesize a piece of history shared by the participants. They encourage deeply affective experiences that some of the participants consider can lead to personal and institutional transformation. By taking part in the art market, Sehgal can strategically change it from within by proposing an aesthetics that forces a change in the procedures followed to exhibit, preserve and acquire the work.

III Body as Archive

The space Sehgal opens up and closes in his situational-based performance is that which only remains in its absence. As it has been argued, in performance theory, performance cannot reside in its material traces so therefore it disappears. But Sehgal complicates the issue of remains as material because his traces are all imbricated in the live body. Sehgal sees the human body as part of the material of which a situation is made up. Assuming a complex setting in which the bodies of both the interpreters and the viewer are seen as material, his situations involve what surrounds the body’s encounter by actively integrating it in the construction of the piece. What is being proposed here is that in the series *Constructed Situations*, the body is explored from a materialistic perspective in which ‘what the body does’ is an integral part of the piece, just like any other material. In answer to the criticism of his work in which he was criticized of fetishizing the body, Sehgal said: “you can’t fetishize the human body,

since fetishize means to animate something, and you can't animate something which is already animated".³⁴ In his answer, Sehgal plays with a logical contradiction; the human body is animated per se. Sehgal uses its potentiality as material. In his work, the human body is either an ephemeral object in the moment of production of the work and right after, in the moment of its deproduction, the body is a living testimony of the experience. This way, the fact that the work is deproduced does not make it stop existing; instead, because there is no documentation, it is saved in the memory of the bodies and carried out in the memory of the participants.

“Somehow it exists in my mind, in my body and the bodies of the people who know how to do it, and it also exists in their memories and of those of the people who saw it.”³⁵

Tino Sehgal's practice challenges the desire of performance to preserve itself. Besides the visible situation, the encounter of the bodies, Sehgal produces the deproduction of this situation. This deproduction is achieved by the intentional undocumentation of the event. At the same time, the undocumented situation does not stop to be the work. In this way, he works towards disappearance, as Peggy Phelan suggests, but without interfering or predicting the moment in which the object will finally be completely forgotten. Since *Constructed Situations* is perpetuated in visitors', participants', interpreters' and museum staff's memory, its object disappears when their collective memory stops existing. The object is therefore transformed into, perpetuated in and carried out in the participants' memories and descriptions of the event.

³⁴ See Frieze Art Talk website: <http://friezearttalk.com/talks/detail/tino-sehgal-in-conversation-with-joerg-heiser/>.

³⁵ Tino Sehgal, Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Interview Project, Volume II, 828

IV Interview Project

As already mentioned in the introduction, the two series of works analysed in this dissertation entertain radically opposed relationships with the archive. While Tino Sehgal refuses any kind of documentation of his work as a way of avoiding the production of visual material related to his practice, Hans-Ulrich Obrist exhaustively documents his interview performances in order to save the remains of what has been said and to produce all kinds of new objects on the basis of this material. Sehgal's project is clearly committed to what he calls the deproduction of performance, whereas Obrist makes a case for the intensified documentation *as* performance.

The Swiss-born art curator started the *Interview Project* (Fig. 6) almost thirty years ago. His first interviews emerged out of frequent studio visits to the artists with whom he had started to work. Having observed a lack of historical facts regarding the production of art processes over the 20th century, Obrist decided to interview aged practitioners (artists, curators, scientists, architects, designers etc.) from the beginning of the century. This on-going project was called the Centenary Project and had as its goal to interview the last generation of creative practitioners that acted in the second half of the 20th century.

Today, *Interview Project* is an extensive archive of more than 2,000 hours of recorded interviews with artists, but also practitioners from other areas such as writers, scientists, engineers, architects, filmmakers, philosophers and curators. It has become an interdisciplinary archive that exists physically on various supports such as video, text and tape records. *Interview Project* has been seen as a curatorial practice in which the practice of the interview has been explored as a medium for a

conversational-based performance. Over the last thirty years, his practice of interviewing started to be intensified and oriented in different ways, branching itself into different fields other than arts and creating cycles of interest. Noticing a gap between the curatorial discussions of the 1990s and the history of curatorial practices before that, Obrist started to interview various practitioners of the 1960s to dig up the history of curating from the 1960s to the present day. He interviewed the protagonists of the most significant curatorial works of the 1960s such as Harald Szeeman, Anne d'Harnoncourt, Werner Hofman and Lucy Lippard.

“The idea of these interviews was to start a history of important curatorial positions in the 1960s (...) These persons (active practitioners) are familiar with the history of what came before them. I mean Szeeman is completely familiar with Harry Graf Kessler, and Willem Standberg is completely familiar with Alexander Dorner. Little by little, through interviewing the protagonists of the 1960s, I got more insight in the historical facts.”³⁶

His interest, more than reconstituting these curatorial events, was to map the development of the curatorial field by understanding the way in which exhibition models were created. Since curating is quite a young field, the work of Hans-Ulrich Obrist has been an enormous contribution to knowledge about the practice and about its historical evolution. As an example of this practice, in his interview with the Swiss curator Harald

³⁶ Hans Ulrich Obrist, Interview with Gavin Wade, *Everything You Wanted to Know About Curating But you Were Afraid to Ask*, Sternberg Press, New York, 2011, 140

Szeeman³⁷ in 1996, Obrist focused the interview towards the curatorial strategy explored in the exhibition “Happenings and Fluxus”. This exhibition, commissioned by Hans Sohm and Harald Szeemann, and that took place at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne in 1970, marked the true beginning of the practice of curating ephemeral works. The exhibition provided a map of the artistic practices of Fluxus in Europe in 1960 and the dialogue of those artists with events in the US a decade earlier.

“HUO: Let's talk about your 1970 exhibition "Happening and Fluxus" in Cologne. In this exhibit, time was more important than space. How did you decide on this approach?

HS: (...) When I was asked by Cologne's cultural minister to do a show, I thought, this is the place to retrace the history of Happenings and Fluxus. Wuppertal, where Nam Jun Paik, Beuys, and Wolf Vostell had staged events, was nearby. So was Wiesbaden, where George Maciunas organized early Fluxus concerts, and in Cologne itself Heiner Friedrich promoted La Monte Young. I chose a three-part structure. Part one was a wall of documents that I put together with Hans Sohm, who had passionately collected the invitations, flyers, and other printed materials that related to all the happenings and events in recent art history. This wall of documents divided the space of Cologne's Kunstverein in two. On each side, there were smaller spaces where artists could present their own work - this was the second part of the show (...) A third part consisted of

³⁷ Harald Szeeman (1933-2005) is seen as one of the most influential practitioners in curatorial practice, his work has been seen as a crucial contribution for the development of curating as an art form.

performances by Vostell, Robert Watts, Dick Higgins, as well as Kaprow's tire piece (...) "³⁸

As it can be seen in this extract, this exhibition was the example of an innovative curatorial model that united ephemeral and visual artworks. For its construction, Szeemann explains, the venue was divided in three sections, part one dedicated to documentation, part two to object artworks and three to performance shows. Later in the interview, Szeemann traces the evolution of this curatorial model to the format explored in Documenta in the same year:

"(...) Beuys participated with his Office of Direct Democracy, where we sat throughout the run of Documenta discussing art, social problems and daily life with visitors of the show. (...) This was the first time that Documenta was no longer conceived as a "100 Day Museum" but as a "100 Day Event". After the summer of 68, theorizing in the art world was order of the day, and it shocked people when I put a stop to all the Hegelian and Marxist discussions." ³⁹

Obrist's interview with Szeeman attempts to recall the evolution of this modality that contributed to the creation of the structure of what later came to be the earlier twenty first century aesthetic institution. Interested in the evolution of exhibition models and the historical evolution of the integration of the ephemeral works in exhibition spaces, his interviews are conducted as a way of gradually mapping the evolution of exhibition

³⁸ Harald Szeeman, Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Brief History of Curating*, JRP Ringier, 2008, 46-47

³⁹ Harald Szeeman, Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Brief History of Curating*, JRP Ringier, 2008, 48

making and curatorial field as an artistic practice.⁴⁰ In his interviews, Obrist does not create a linear history of curatorial events, but rather an open narrative that relates historical facts and experimental programs developed in the early curating of the twentieth century. Another example of his interviews as a tool to collect testimonies from curatorial events is the interview with the curator Walter Hopps, in which Hopps retells the story of what was involved in the construction of ‘Thirty-Six Hours’, an exhibition from 1978 at MOTA (Museum of Temporary Art) in Pen State in which all kinds of people (artists and non-artists) were invited to bring a piece they would like to expose. The pieces were shown during 36 hours and were later archived by the museum.

“HUO: If one looks at the encyclopedic range of exhibitions you’ve organized, it’s striking that, besides the exhibitions that take place in and redefine museum spaces, you’ve also done shows in other spaces and contexts where you tend to change the rules of what an exhibition actually is. I’m interested in these dialectics – the exhibitions that take place outside the museum create a friction with what takes place inside the museum, and vice versa. By questioning these expectations the museum becomes a more active space. When you were a museum curator in Washington you organized the show called Thirty-Six Hours at an alternative space.

WP: Yes, Thirty-Six Hours was literally organized from the street. There was practically no budget, no money.

HUO: So you actually only had a small alternative space, the Museum of Temporary Art, at your disposal.

⁴⁰ The publication “A Brief History of Curating”(2008), Obrist edited a series of interviews like this one in which we can actually see how the curating developed as a practice over the years.

WP: Right. It had a basement and four floors. It normally just showed on two of those floors. It normally just showed on two of those floors. More people will come than fit two floors. They said: How do you know? And I said: If you say you're having a show where anyone who brings anything can be shown, people are going to come.

HUO: So you actually did the hanging when people brought things. (...)

WP: My only requirement was that it had to fit through the door.”⁴¹

‘Thirty-Six Hours’ was an experiment in which the space of the museum was challenged and transformed into a space that could reflect on the relationship of the inhabitants of Pen State with the local museum. The experiment also raised the issue of the importance of collecting social memories of everyday life in an institutional archive. Implicit in Obrist’s interview practice is the constant will to challenge the archive by questioning the filter that determines what should be saved and, once saved, in which display they should be shown. As an example of his own practice, in several interviews, Obrist refers to the exhibition “The Dresden Room” (1927). Most commonly known as “The Abstract Cabinet”⁴², this exhibition, curated by Alexandre Dorner, was an example of a provocative model of exhibition making in which Dorner invited the soviet artist El Lissitzky to project a pavilion and curate several abstract paintings inside it. The result was a three dimensional piece in which the works were disposed in a non-chronological way and also non-thematic, thus avoiding categorizations.

⁴¹ Walter Hopps, Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist Walter Hopps, *Brief History of Curating*, JRP Ringier, 2008, 22-23

⁴² “The Abstract Cabinet” was the name of the frontispiece of the exhibition.

“If you think that Dörner invited El Lissitzky to make the Lissitzky’s room, the “Kabinett der Abstrakten” in 1927, it would be quite a daring thing to do a museum now: to invite a contemporary artist not to do a show, but to actually hand the collection in a room where the artworks of other artists could be “moved around” and curated by visitors.”⁴³

The title “The Abstract Cabinet” reassembles the concept ‘*Wunderkammer*’, most commonly known as ‘Cabinet of Curiosities’ which was the name given to archival rooms where heterogeneous objects from all different materials were combined and collected together. This three-dimensional project room was an invitation for the viewer to find, ‘new’ possible connections between the artworks that were exhibited. The exhibition was an experiment about revisiting the archive in which the bodies of work of the artists were reinterpreted by Lissitzky and placed in the space in order to initiate unexpected dialogues. Similarly, Obrist’s interviews invite artists to revisit their own archive, alluding to a kind of opening of the artist studio in which many comparisons with other artists’ artworks become possible.

As previously stated, the *Interview Project* has been taken to different stages and has been explored in different displays. With the same interest in capturing what is left aside in art history, Obrist started to stage his interviews in an event called *24 hours Marathon Interviews*, (Fig.7) where he repeatedly interviews creative practitioners for twenty-four hours straight. The events are dedicated to a specific theme and practitioners from all areas are invited to participate in the same conversation. This practice

⁴³ Hans-Ulrich Obrist.

occurs in the frame of the museum or gallery, which gives it an intimacy similar to a performance. As the title suggests, these performances can last up to 24, or even 48, hours. This harks back to the practice of ‘endurance art’⁴⁴, which refers to performances that are planned to last a long period of time and commonly involving some form of hardship, such as pain, solitude or exhaustion. In this performance display, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, in a similar manner to Marina Abramovic in *The Artist is Present*, challenges his own physical endurance, taking his presence to exhaustion. In his performance, the challenge of Obrist's physical endurance intensifies the presence almost to its complete exhaustion. This exhaustion of presence is equivalent to the exhaustion of documentation. As every moment of these events is documented in various forms, it can subsequently create a text machine that is designed and thought to deliver to the reader an equivalent of the original viewer's experience. In parallel with the Interviews practice, a text machine of the interviews is being produced. This way, the exhaustive presence in Obrist's performance is not to celebrate any kind of authenticity of the present moment (like Abramovic does), but is instead to assure this documentation of ‘everything said in the event’ as far as possible.

This conversational-based work can be seen as both an extension of the work and its archive. As Peggy Phelan argues about Sophie Calle's work *Ghosts*⁴⁵, a performative event can never be reproduced, but it can be extended to another form, by being incorporated into another body of work. The same can be said about the *Interview Project* that is first performed and only later transformed into a text. As Paul Auslander argues in

⁴⁴ Endurance Art is a concept design by art historian Michael Fallon that refers to performances that are planned to last a long period of time commonly involving some form of hardship, such as pain, solitude or exhaustion.

⁴⁵ Calle interviewed various visitors and members of the museum staff, asking them to describe the stolen paintings (paintings that disappeared from Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in 1990). She then transcribed these texts and placed them next to the photographs of the galleries.

Performativity of Performance Documentation, the document as a supplement to the performance can challenge the ontological priority of the live performance. Amelia Jones in *Unpredictable Temporalities: The Body and Performance in Art History*, goes even further in foregrounding the mutual supplementary nature of performance or body art on the one hand and the document (photographs, texts, recordings etc.) on the other.

In the case of *Interview Project*, the text that later becomes a book publication is a result of a process of traceability of the documentation left by the event, such as the recordings and the photographs. These elements work together in order to translate the performativity of the event into text. The text then gives the performative dynamic back to the words uttered in the interview. Reading Obrist's Interviews, Volume I and II (Fig.8), means having access to the performativity of the event transformed into another form. Sophie Calle's *Ghosts* and *Interview Project* are both conversational-based works in which the performative act of conversation (in the sense of Austin's classical definition) is being explored.

In the context of art history making, *Interview Project* can be seen from various perspectives. One of those has to do with the way in which the work dialogues with traditional ways of writing art history. In opposition to an archive that strives for categorization, Obrist proposes an oral history of art, focused not on periods, schools or thematizations, but rather on the processes of art making themselves. This way, his work can be seen as an on-going anthology of art. A good example of his interest in this practice is his interview with the English historian Eric Hobsbawm:

“HUO: I wondered if you could talk a little bit about this dynamic notion of memory because you always said memory changes, history changes.

EH: (...) And if one were to rely only on one's memory one could not write adequate history. This is one of the great drawbacks of writing oral history; the secret of historical method in the past was you had to discover what can go wrong in documents and that's a thing from the late seventeenth century on people discovered: what can go wrong in copying documents. We need a similar discipline in what can go wrong with memory: how reliable is it and in what peculiar ways does it operate? (...)“⁴⁶

Obrist's interest in exploring the dynamic of memory as a constitutive of history is obvious. After this interview, Obrist started to call his project “a protest against forgetting”, a definition proposed by Eric Hobsbawn. If we consider Obrist an artist-archivist, his practice reveals more layers than we initially expected. He explores the role of the art historian, adding a creative way of organizing events and art discourses from the various decades of the 20th century. When looking at *Interview Project*, we should see the words as the work's material.

Interview Project challenges the rigid and formalized past that shapes and divides art events over the 20th century. Through the use of oral sources, Obrist is attempting to reconstruct the past by unearthing nuances of these historical events that were somehow ‘forgotten’. Moreover, his methodology of oral history is not simply important in checking the reliability of historical facts, but in locating their motifs in a non-chronological display.

In *The Shape of Time* (1962), the art historian George Kubler foregrounds a critique of the traditional pathways of art history, in which historiography practice was based on the notion of different styles. Arguing against an art history constructed on periodizations, (systems of thought

⁴⁶ Eric Hobsbawn, Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Interview Project*, Volume II, 45-48

that he calls ‘closed circuits’) Kubler fights against periodization that forcedly divides the history of objects in periods of time. Rejecting this ‘notion of period style’, a notion that necessarily brings all objects and events of the same time together, Kubler proposes a non-linear history of objects and events. Kubler also states that this ‘rhetoric of progress’ had a significant influence on what can be called the ‘narrative of styles’ of art history, which sustains itself in biological terms, thus suggesting an evolutionary thinking model for art history thinking. As he writes:

“However useful it is for pedagogical purposes the biological metaphor of style as a sequence of life stages was historically misleading, for it bestowed upon the flux of events the behavior and shape of organisms.”⁴⁷

Likewise, Obrist proposes a discontinued history of art, freed from the framework given by the above-mentioned biological metaphor. In an attempt to resist traditional ways of writing history, Obrist trusts his method of collecting testimonies of various practitioners, attempting to include them in a relational sphere of events that, if analysed, might build multiple perspectives and, consequently, multiple layered narratives from the same period of time. In conclusion, Kubler argues that the use of biological terms in the field of art history often produces the effect of a rhetoric authority. As the art historian notes, this rhetoric of progress contributes to the categorization of artworks and art events, starting by segregating them in three different temporalities; present, past and future. Obrist’s conversational aesthetics treat this approach to art history in two different ways. The first relies on his strategically constructed dialogue that is constantly referring to the past. Obrist’s questions primarily interrogate

⁴⁷ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, Yale University Press, 1962, 8

artists and all creative practitioners about past events in which they actively participated. If a notion could be added to this practice, it would be that of 'retrospective dialogue'. In the interview with the artist Holler Carsten, this notion becomes explicit when Obrist invites the artist to reflect on one of his projects and re-frame it in the context of the exhibition "Laboratirum", where it was shown, and on the discussions with the theorists Bruno Latour and Luc Steels.

"**HUO:** In our last conversation on doubt, we spoke about your Laboratory of Doubt. I'd like to know how, retrospectively, you consider this project and how it functioned in the framework of the exhibition "Laboratorium" (various venues thorough Antwerp, 1999) that we all mounted together with Barbara (Vanderlindin), and with the brainstorm group consisting you, Bruno Latour and Luc Steels (...)" ⁴⁸

In *Interview Project*, if we consider the interview as the medium, its medium functions as the vehicle of communication between the current conversation and past events in general history. Moreover, Obrist encourages his interviewees to look backwards in history and to re-position their work within the history of the 20th century art processes and the bodies of work of other artists. If we account for the historiography of the interview itself, it certainly allows for speculation on the problem of time. In this case, it can be said that interview as a medium has a singular engagement with time. Hence, the *Interview Project* is certainly a model for rethinking the interview as a medium.

However, the existence of an art of conversation as a field of contemporary art is not yet widely accepted. What is known for sure is that

⁴⁸ Holler Carster, Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Interview Project, Volume 1, 407

the influence of the interview as a hybrid form between performance and documentation of encounters has become more clear. In Michael Drier's analysis of the evolution of the art interview as a genre, he argues that its late appearance is dual for two reasons. The first is the fact that the art interview offers a way to access the artist not as an event but as an auto-interpreter. The idea of the artist as his or her own interpreter was, until the 1960s, widely contested in the context of art criticism. Due to this, the artists in the 1960s and 1970s started to use the interview as a way of expressing their opinions on their works and answering the criticism of their time. The practice was strongly motivated by the artists Carl Andre, Donald Judd and Robert Morris who 'took the explanation of their work into their hands.'⁴⁹ The second reason was related to the dependence of the interview on technological records, given its necessity to convey the information into another medium. The fact that interview practice itself demanded its transference into another medium compromised the genre with a mediatized format. As the interview has the speed of a conversation (a speed which memory cannot record exactly how it was, and neither can a written form), the use of technological tools to save what has been said was essential for the practice. Because the domestic technology to record interviews started to become accessible only around 1960s and 1970s, the interview only became more popular in those decades. As Drier interestingly notes, the art interview had its major development as an activity in the moment of the spread of media culture:

“The technologies of visual media, above all television, have unexpectedly empowered the act of speech and spoken word, talk shows, statements, and interviews on the most arcane of topics.

⁴⁹ Michael Drier's in the Introduction of Interview Project, Volume I, 2008, 5

Records and empty tapes ask to be put to use, an increasing number of channels require transmission (...)”⁵⁰

V Infinite Conversations

Obrist calls the *Interview Project*, the project of ‘infinite conversations’, which refers to Maurice Blanchot’s book with the same title. “The Infinite Conversations” is a collection of essays where Blanchot creates a discourse on conversations as plurality, as a way of ‘attempting to disrupt his own writing, often making it sound like a conversation.’ The text is structured as a dialogue, where Blanchot sustains a dialogue with a number of thinkers whose contributions have marked turning points in the history of Western culture. In “Infinite Conversations”, Blanchot argues for a discursive aesthetics that takes the modality of conversation in opposition to a classic literary modality. Blanchot wrote at length about the aesthetics of the conversation. He believed that a conversation, in opposition to traditional written discourse, has certain pauses that belong to its natural course; these pauses, or interruptions, are a very significant characteristic of the speech act for Blanchot:

“The fact that speech needs to pass from one interlocutor to another in order to be confirmed, contradicted, or developed shows the necessity of an interval. The power of speaking interrupts itself, and this interruption plays a role that appears to be minor – precisely the role of the subordinated relation. This role is so enigmatic that can be interpreted as bearing the very enigma of language: pause

⁵⁰ Michael Drier’s in the Introduction of Interview Project, Volume I, 2008, 3

between sentences, pause from one interlocutor, to another, and pause of attention the hearing that doubles the force of locution.”⁵¹

Certainly, in *Interview Project*, Obrist is aware of how a conversation can rupture the flow of discourse. Similarly to what Blanchot suggests, Obrist aims to create a conversation that refers to an oral history of collected conversations, in which interruption, redundancy and even repetition are welcome as part of the necessarily improvised status of a conversation. Besides later existing in a text form, *Interview Project* has as its base the aesthetics of a conversation. For the printed version of the interview, the layout designer Mathias Augustyniak, together with Hans Ulrich Obrist, tries to capture the essence of the conversation and tries ‘to convey in the layout of the book edition the same ‘harmony’ of the conversation.’⁵²

At stake, in both live and printed versions, is the productive notion of how thought can move through a conversation. In his interview with the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, this notion is explored when Gadamer goes far beyond in time and connects the legacy of our speech conversational modality with Plato’s dialogues:

“**HUO:** In *Gedicht und Gespräch* (Poem and Conversation, 1990), you explain precisely that language only lives in the conversation.

HGG: Of course, because in conversation one is indeed always in motion. By giving an answer, the other completes one's one speaking.

⁵¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, Translated by Susan Hanson. University of Minnesota, 1993.

⁵² Hans-Ulrich Obrist.

HUO: Again and again you refer to the importance of conversation to philosophy in your work, and how rarely conversation appears in philosophy after Plato. How would you explain the absence of conversation in the history of philosophy?

HGG: People still don't believe that Plato did not have the answers to the questions asked. But actually, this is essential to the question. We are cheating if we ask questions we know the answers to. The natural way is that one wants to understand the other and his answer too.”⁵³

As the interview moves forward, both protagonists relate their practice developing to meta-linguistic discourse, since both interview and interviewee are reflecting on conversations:

“**HUO:** In interviews, you often mention the downright catalyzing effect which your conversations with Heidegger had on you. Could you say something about your first meetings? You describe the first conversation in particular as a crucial event.

HGG: I must admit that I cannot really remember this exactly anymore. I think that one should realize above all that Heidegger has recognized the importance of silence. This constitutes a significant part of his effect. Silence is a way of talking. It invites completion.

HUO: This reminds me of John Cage and his iconoclastic gesture of

⁵³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Interview Project, Volume I, 443, 444

remaining silent.

HGG: This is a game with the dying down of sound. I couldn't imagine a stronger feeling of serenity then when a piece of music comes to an end and fades away.

HUO: Should we stop now? (...) “⁵⁴

This extract proves Obrist's awareness of the dynamic relationship between the interview and the interviewee, and his interest in the possibility of managing the unexpected paths of the conversation. It is also a reflection on how asking a question is already formulating an answer.⁵⁵

As Erik Vergahen suggests, the interview can call on various methods and configurations, but mainly develops in two different directions, either “centrifugal” when the central theme of discussion moves outwards, or “centripetal” when it moves towards a central theme. As Vergahen writes:

“In the first instance, the interviewer adopts a low profile, holding back so as to be attuned to his interlocutor, “accompanying” him or her in the musical sense of the term. Whereas in the second instance, the interviewer tries on the contrary to draw the interviewee towards him, the best interviews obviously being those which convey a balance between these two dynamics.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Interview Project, Volume I, 444, 445.

⁵⁵ In other words, the Portuguese philosopher João dos Santos would ask in his famous radio show in 1995: “If you don't know, why do you ask?”

⁵⁶ Erik Verhagen, “On Interviews”, translation Simon Pleasance, *Critique d'Art*, 32, Automne 2008, Accessed in 12 June 2016: <http://critiquedart.revues.org/775>

As it can be noted, Obrist is interested in letting the conversation unfold without implicating predetermined or planned structures and narratives. In his performative conversations, neutrality functions as a central element of the action. However, in the context of the artistic interview, neutrality is different from passivity, which tends towards predetermined stability and a dialogue without equal protagonists. Neutrality, as an element of action, refers to the intervals and pauses in the conversation, the less defined and open space between the words and the moment before the conversation where it is implicitly set as a quasi-rule allowing the performative fluidity of the conversation itself without excluding (and at times even encouraging) the possibility of interruptions, hesitations, repetitions and other contingencies. In that way, neutrality renders the conversation less consciously guided, but more conceptually structured. This way, Obrist opens up the possibility to combine two complementary dynamics. As Louis Marin writes, the interview is a “discourse perforce at risk of drift or in danger of improvisation, because part if not all of it that is uttered will be so in the form of replies provoked by a question, of which neither of the two parties involved is truly master”.⁵⁷

As the interview moves forward, Obrist increasingly withdraws from his role as an active interviewer, leaving space for the unpredictable paths of the conversation. As shown, the conversation is simultaneously conducted by both interviewer and interviewee. This way, *Interview Project* builds an ongoing conversation in which common meaning is produced mostly because the conversation that is being ‘performed’ fragments itself

57 Louis Marin, *De l'Entretien*, Paris, Minuit, 1997, 11-12

by changing protagonists. Obrist designs his interviews as unpredictable conversations.

Another notion is at stake in ‘infinite conversations’. As I argued in the last chapter, Obrist conducts his interviews as a way of allowing a reinterpretation of art events from the past in the present moment of his interviews, when he interviews practitioners who participated in those events. At the same time, these interviews that refer to the past are continued in time. For example, he interviews the same practitioner several times over the years, accompanying his work and linking the first interview to the second, third etc., taking the last interview as a point of departure for the new one. This dynamic also contributes to what we can call an infinite conversation. Obrist, while being in the present, dialogues with the past, but at the same time pushes the dialogue into the future. As an example, at the end of his interviews, Obrist always asks his interviewees “what is your unrealized project?” Together with Julia Peyton-Jones in the Serpentine Gallery, Obrist has created what he calls the ‘Agency of Unrealized Projects’, an archive in which all the answers to his final question are saved, waiting to be realized.

VI Looking Forward: The Archive of the Future

As I have shown, the notion of the past as a temporality arranged in the present in Hans-Ulrich Obrist’s interviews can be seen as the bulk of his project. But the comprehensive documentation of his events also reveals an anxiety of time that somehow wishes to accelerate the present in order to achieve provisional traces of the future. In *Marathon Interviews*, Obrist’s exhaustion of presence is equivalent to the exhaustion of documentation, as if he uses the present as a vehicle to push information and historical facts forward, collected in his conversations. The interviews are documented through various supports; Obrist projects the performativity of the present

moment in the future performativity of the document by recording the event, assuring the performativity of its traces and protesting in advance against forgetfulness.

In this way, Obrist's interview format goes beyond the idea of registering past events that have been forgotten. It is a tool for research about the future.

“Several ghost versions on the next thousand pages have existed over the course of this book's germination – each of each were notional promises and premises of the future Interviews, Volume 3, Volume 4, and so on. They also promise of future productions of reality in the books, buildings, exhibitions and marathons that *Interview Project* trigger.”⁵⁸

Obrist claims his conversations to be preparatory ‘sketches’ of his curatorial works. In this way, instead of a work that dissolves into disappearance, as Peggy Phelan suggests, the documentation of Interviews Project has the ability to perpetuate the presence of the present moment into a future display. Obrist fights against what has been understood as presence, by underlining in his project the impossibility of presence as a unique site for the body. For him, the archive of *Interview Project* is a space in which his interviews may influence the future.

Chapter Three

I Performance Afterlives

The expression “performance afterlife” appeared for the first time in the context of a cycle of conferences organized at the festival “Crossing the

⁵⁸ Karen Marta in preface of *Interview Project*, Volume II, 11

Line” at the Museum of Modern Art⁵⁹ in New York in fall 2015. The cycle of conferences, entitled ‘Afterlives: The Persistence of Performance’ and curated by the scholars André Lepecki and Adrian Heathfield, was dedicated to the problem of archiving and preserving performance art. As a point of departure, the conference claimed to rethink the persistence of performance in time by proposing a politically and aesthetically alternative frame for performance art in order to challenge the preconceptions concerning performance art's materiality.

“Performance is increasingly documented, archived, institutionally incorporated, and globally disseminated. While its ephemeral nature is often celebrated, its inherent transience binds it to its many returns—its mediations and afterlives. Today, criticism is focused more on the recurrence and persistence of performance than on its disappearance.”⁶⁰

The term ‘afterlife’ invites us to think about the materiality of performance art after the event has taken place, or ‘after its fact-ness.’⁶¹ The term suggests that the material constitutive of performance stays ‘alive’ after its moment of production. Therefore, it suggests that after its production, the material can subsequently be situated in a ‘second support’ where the traces of the performance are saved or inscribed. As I have shown, it is not commonly agreed that performance remains in its documentation. This idea of a ‘second support’ therefore complicates what

⁵⁹ “Crossing the Line” Festival website: Accessed in 16 June 2016, <http://www.fiaf.org/crossingtheline/2015/heathfield-lepecki.shtml>

⁶⁰ Curatorial text of André Lepecki and Adrian Heathfield in “Crossing the Line”, in Moma, 2015.

⁶¹ Schneider’s expression in “Performance Remains”, *Performance Research, Journal of Performing Arts*, 2014, 105

has been defined as performance ontology since the 1970s. As argued before, performance was usually seen as a practice that only existed in the 'present moment', being continually celebrated as the art form of the "here and now." In 1993, Peggy Phelan, stated that 'performance cannot be saved, recorded or documented'. As she argued, to the degree that performance attempts to ender in the economy of reproduction, it betrays its own ontology.⁶²

However, as argued in Chapter One, what is considered as presence in the aesthetics of performance art relies on a paradox.⁶³ The core of this paradox is the fact that what claims to be 'presence' in performance art doesn't necessarily happen in the actual present. I will show how this paradox of presence, which is often seen as the principal aesthetic feature of performance art, is aligned with the paradox of 'being alive'. As ephemerality is celebrated as an aesthetic condition, the result of performative practice is the idea of its disappearance into absence. The much celebrated 'present moment' refers to a unique and authentic instant that only exists along with the actual performance, so that immediately after its fact-ness (to repeat Schneider's notion) the present vanishes into absence and the object 'stops existing'. This idea, emphasized over and over in performance theory,⁶⁴ simultaneously articulates the image of a deconstruction and deproduction of the self-extinguishing object of performance.

It is this idea of performance as merely existing in the actual present which excludes the possibility of 'life' that extends itself into non-animated materials such as those that constitute the common traces of performance: texts, records, audio-visual supports and photographs. This archival

⁶² Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, 143.

⁶³ See chapter one.

⁶⁴ I am referring to scholars such as Peggy Phelan and Herbert Blau, who defend that performance only belongs to the present.

division that separates the present from the past reproduces the same binary structure that can be found in the separation between life and non-life, a separation that has regulated a lot of performance art's aesthetic and philosophical commitments. What if we asked, historically, when and how these binary oppositions of present vs. past and life vs. non-life came to be tied up in defining the 'life' of the object of performance? The concept of the 'death of the object', ultimately emphasized with the rise of postmodernism, has become notorious in and through various forms of art. But somehow, in performance art, the idea of the 'death of the object' is more obvious and therefore more openly celebrated. According to Rebecca Schneider, the idea of performance as 'disappearing' has been emphasized by the way in which its products have been archived. Since the archiving of performance art claims to 'save' the remains of its "disappearance" (what is supposed to be performance's originary ontological condition), the idea of the 'death of the object' is articulated by the archive itself, as Schneider intimates in the following passage:

"I have discussed the parricidal impulse as productive of death in order to insure remains. I have suggested that the increasing technologies of archiving may be why the late 20th century has been both so enamored of performance and so replete with deaths: death of author, death of science, death of history, death of literature, death of character, death of the avant-garde, death of modernism."⁶⁵

Historically, most approaches to the object of performance establish a relationship between the immaterial (non-graspable) ephemeral object and

⁶⁵ Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains", *Performance Research, Journal of Performing Arts*, 2014, 105

the 'death of the object'. In other words, it has been emphasized that when the object loses itself in disappearance, it "stops existing" and 'dies' in its absence. But what exactly does the 'death of the object' of performance mean historically? In the context of performance art history, it is related to the assumption that an object is constituted solely by material elements (which denies any kind of material that is not given support in a material object) and with the necessity of the archive to collect and register a stable, not mutable object. Considering disappearance as performance's ontological condition was therefore a necessary ingredient to fix and ensure the originality and authenticity of its original product. In this view, the death of the object of performance is a condition for the celebration of its ephemerality.

However, if we follow Lepecki's and Healthfield's suggestion that performance extends its materiality into its afterlife, we should first try to look at the traces of performance not as 'not alive', but as animated material capable of communicating and containing performativity.⁶⁶ This alternative view paves the way to the understanding that the object domain of performance art, in its afterlife (after its existence), may still consist of objects.⁶⁷ But if we consider "disappearance" as a fundamental feature of performance, what kind of object would result from that consideration? Here, I will follow Mieke Bal's strategy, who tried to (re)define the object domain of visual culture in order to understand the causes of visual essentialism. I will first look at the object domain of performance art. In order to establish the object domain of visual culture, Bal started by calling our attention to the ambiguity of the word 'object' itself. She writes:

⁶⁶ Paul Auslander argument in "The Performativity of Performance Documentation", see Chapter one.

⁶⁷ This notion appears in opposition to the idea that performance art after its production disappears.

“According to *Chambers Dictionaries* (1996), an object is a material thing, but also aim or purpose, a person or thing to which action, feelings or thoughts are directed: thing, intention and target.”

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This definition, although heavily ambiguous, explicitly discusses the possible co-existence of the two faces of the object, one immaterial and the other material (the object's face that we usually get to see).

Evidently, the material object is graspable and more easily visible, whereas the immaterial belongs to the less visible sphere of affects, wishes and intentions. Bal goes further in investigating how the immaterial facet of the object (a ‘person or a thing intention’) interacts with the subject in order to become visible. As she explains, this interaction occurs through the correlation between ‘thing’ and ‘aim’, which only become visible when is embodied in a subject. The subject, once carrying an ‘intention’ resultant of the combination of ‘thing’ and ‘aim’, directs that intention into an object. As Ball writes:

“The conflation of thing with aim does not imply attributing intentions to objects, although to some extent such a case could be made. The conflation, instead, casts the shadow of intention of the subject over the object.”⁶⁹

As Andre Lepecki⁷⁰ suggests, Silvia Benso’s concept that ‘things have a sociability force of their own that resists the scope and perspective given by humans’ can help us understand how the traces left by an event

⁶⁸ Mieke Bal, Visual Essentialism or the Object of Visual Culture, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2003, 8

⁶⁹ Bal, *Visual Essentialism*, 8.

⁷⁰ In the conference “Decolonizing Curating Imagination”, Lepecki cites Silvia Benso’s book “The Face of Things” in which Benso’s defends that an ‘alterity of things’ should be recognized, preserved and celebrated.’

can themselves be ‘alive’.⁷¹ As Silvia Benson argues in “The Face of Things”, the ‘object’ is still subjugated to the manipulation of the subject.⁷²

In this scope, performance physical objects, such as documents, tape records, texts, photographs should be considered as things that speak and communicate on their own and don’t have to be categorized in order to be readable. These objects continue ‘alive’, either as material physical traces or as immaterial reverberations, such as the memories and affective effects of the event.

In order to demonstrate how *Constructed Situations* and *Interview Project* dialogue with the possible after-existence of their performances, I shall first analyse how the concept is embedded in Obrist's and Sehgal's aesthetics. As I've demonstrated in the last two parts ‘Bodies as Archives’ and ‘Looking Forward: The Archive of the Future’, both works are aware of the extension of their work into the archive. Whereas Tino Sehgal strives against documentation and entrusts the continuation of his work to the participants (who actively built the piece), Hans-Ulrich Obrist exhaustively documents his interviews and events to make sure everything is widely ‘saved’ in various memory sources. Therefore, their aesthetics in relation to the archival extension of their work are radically different. Sehgal embraces the deproduction of the work (after its production), whereas Obrist works with the hyper-production of various material traces after the ‘actual’ production of his work.

⁷¹ In the sense that they did not stop exist, they have performativity and have a relation between themselves.

⁷² As Benso's argues: “An object is an endless reproduction and confirmation of the manipulative abilities of the subject”, in *The Face of Things*, State University of New York, 2000, 33

In order to understand how their objects unfold and extend themselves, I call on Mieke Bal definition of the object in visual culture in relation to performance art and project it onto the object domain of performance. We will see how those two faces or facets (material and immaterial) work together in both aesthetic projects. We will also see how these projects constantly navigate from the material to the immaterial pole and vice versa. Sehgal, on the one hand, builds the material side of the object using concrete human bodies, their histories and their voices, which will force the object to ultimately deproduce itself (the bodies of the participants that move in and out of the museum). The initially material object transforms itself into an immaterial one, whose elements are the remains of the affective energy and the memories of the event in the bodies and minds of the participants. In comparison, Obrist deals with an immaterial object at the beginning when collecting the testimonies of the practitioners he interviews. In Mieke Bal's words, he is interested in the collection of intentional objects that he subsequently transforms into material, physically localizable traces: books, films, audio records, websites.⁷³ (He also relates intentional objects to other ones when he refers to other interviews to ask similar questions to new interviewees etc.)

Beyond these ontological considerations, the term afterlife also invites us to ponder the politics of preservation of ephemeral works. These politics are inevitably extended to the logic of the archive. Let us consider exactly how both works challenge the traditional logic of the archive by making explicit how the notion of the after-life redefines the relation of performance art and archival culture.⁷⁴

⁷³ Interview Project website: www.i21c.org/the-interview-project/

⁷⁴ By traditional logic of the archive I use the definition of Richard Thomas in "Archive and Utopia" in which 'archive' is understood as an "operational field of knowledge".

Constructed Situations passes into its afterlife in the moment of its deproduction. As I argued in ‘Body as Archive’ (Chapter Two), Sehgal uses bodies as “continents” within his own archive. The afterlife of Sehgal’s piece is situated in the intersubjective space created between the participants. The trace elements of his performance are made up of the memories of the event or, to quote André Lepecki, of a created ‘infrastructure of feelings’⁷⁵ related to the event. These traces are, by nature, invisible. So, at the same time that Sehgal highlights the existence of an afterlife of his performances, he complicates the idea by not letting the afterlife be directly seen. From the realm of visual culture, Mieke Bal made the point that the ‘gaze’ is still our culturally privileged sense that has the task of making those aspects of objects graspable that otherwise remain hidden:

“Sight establishes a particular relation to reality in which the visual aspect of the object is considered to be a property of the object itself. The practices invested of looking at any object constitute the object domain.”⁷⁶

Sehgal’s aesthetics tries to limit the role of observers, since everyone in the room is implicitly collaborating in the piece and therefore their gaze over the piece cannot be disconnected from their active performance. However, the invisibility of the immaterial side of its object is only articulated to become visible when incorporated into the action of a subject (or a group). In other words, the immaterial object that appears in the aftermath of his performance is only visually seen when one of the participants decides to perform it again. The human bodies in Sehgal’s piece are the material element that constitutes the work and they are also

⁷⁵ André Lepecki expression in his curatorial text for the festival ‘Crossing the Line’, 2015

⁷⁶ Bal, *Visual Essentialism*, 11.

the material through which the performance's possible afterlife will be guaranteed (since Sehgal refuses any kind of documentation and claims the body to be both site and material of his performances.) As Rebecca Schneider expresses in an intriguing way:

“Flesh itself, in our ongoing cultural habituation to sight-able remains, supposedly cannot remain to signify ‘once’ (upon a time) (...) In the archive, flesh is given to be that which slips away. Flesh can house no memory of bone. Only bone speaks memory of flesh.”⁷⁷

The afterlife of *Constructed Situations*, similarly to the archives of primitive societies or of ‘peoples without writing’⁷⁸, is a living archive, composed of embodied memory and affective experiences of the event. Since Sehgal delivers the articulation of the visibility of its object to the bodies that participated in the performance, he inevitably creates a practice of body-to-body transmission, where the memory is housed in the body and the acts of story-telling, repeated gestures, and other ritual practices, such as re-enactments of these performances, are understood as ways to write the history of these events. In this way, Sehgal inscribes his work in the negation of the logic of the traditional archive by simultaneously proposing an alternative concept of an ‘archive of the flesh’.

As Rebecca Schneider suggests, in the archives of performance art, only the ‘bones’, arguably the ‘skeleton’ of the events are saved and admitted in the archive. ‘Flesh’ is disavowed as a non-valuable object that can contain memory. Sehgal proposes the opposite. He sees flesh, as an object material of the world in which he can deposit his archive.

⁷⁷ Schneider, *Performance Remains*, 102.

⁷⁸ Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, 33

In *Interview Project*, the traces of the events (forcedly worked upon to be independent objects) are seen as part of the huge archive of the monolithic project. As part of the archive, they are seen as non-animated material, frozen in the way in which they were archived, and therefore as remains of the 'real' event where bodies contributed to its real-time factness. Returning to Mieke Bal's, the very 'act of seeing' also constitutes an event. There is no extemporal, disembodied view from nowhere. It is this event of gazing that constitutes the frame in which we talk about art and culture. The gaze is also the predominant sense that regulates our understanding of how objects of performance are observed and archived. With other words, as long as there is nothing to see (both literally and figuratively), there is no object that can possibly be collected and registered. Bearing the shortcomings of this cultural prejudice in mind, we should consider the traces of *Interview Project* (photographs, video recordings, texts) as being inextricably linked to the event of seeing.

The observer who sees the documentation of the performative interviews does not possess a disembodied view. She is a seeing subject and, watching the documented remains of the performance, she becomes part of the event of seeing instead of becoming isolated from it. Each time that a reader encounters Volume I or II of *Interview Project* or visits the website, he is in contact not only with the performativity of the performances (as argued in chapter 3), but also with their possible afterlives.⁷⁹ The document is then read as a performative act, as a document related to a site-specific performative event.

Obrist challenges the fact that performance has been rejected as a historical practice that both draws from various histories to realize itself and

⁷⁹ If we want to go further in this statement, we could say that the participant/observer of the material elements is giving back 'flesh' to the new event.

actively shapes and contributes to its own history. Just like Sehgal, but with quite different aesthetic means, Obrist's *Interview Project* promotes a 'new' way of incorporating collective memory into the archival body, which according to Jacques Le Goff can lead to 'a new kind of history that should necessarily constitute a new kind of archive.'⁸⁰

The idea that a performative event only consists in its 'live act' and that it is therefore solely constituted by that 'present moment' leads to a perspective that privileges the 'being there' (and being inside the institutional frame) to other types of encounters. My examples show that the idea of the 'death of the object' in performance art is basically grounded in a biological metaphor where the event is understood to be 'live' and where its traces are part of its disappearance and its ultimate 'death'. One of the central paradoxes in preserving performance art is not excluding the possibility of 'flesh' from the archive (the immaterial side of the object that constantly 'slips away', but nevertheless exists), but only counting the 'skeleton' and physical material of the performance event as part of the archive. As Rebecca Schneider argues in respect to the paradox of preserving performance art:

"If the living corpse is a remain of history, it is certainly revisited across a body that cannot pass as the corpse it re-calls. If it cannot pass, what kind of claim of authenticity can such a faulty corpse demand?"⁸¹

The expression "Performance Afterlife" claims that the archive is alive and that each time a performance trace is revisited, it is incorporated

⁸⁰ Le Goff, *History and Memory*, 95.

⁸¹ Schneider, *Performance Remains*, 108

into the observer's experience and consequently 'brought to life.' When I anticipated (in Chapters Two and Three) that the aesthetics of both works expand the actual projects into their archives, I was already underlining this crucial dimension of the afterlives of these projects.

II Conclusion

This dissertation concerns the study of two different, but complementary aesthetic strategies that challenge dominant archival structures. I chose two series of artworks, *Constructed Situations* and *Interview Project* as examples of works that challenge the way in which performance art has been preserved and historicized. I tried to show how they provision the act of documentation of their works and which transformations that would bring to the traditional processes of archiving. More specifically, I tried to show how both works aesthetics contribute for innovative ways of archiving.

As argued, performance art is an art form, which ontological features pressure the museum structure as well as the ways in which we write history. Besides this already existing feature, as I argued, *Constructed Situations* and *Interview Project* have, on the basis of their aesthetics a triggering feature that challenges, actively, the archive and the way in which past works have been historicized. To understand this feature of their aesthetics, I tried to explore, in the first place, the object domain of their performances, comparing its larger definition to the traditional way it has been seen. As showed in the analysis of the works, both propose a complex object that can be seen in more than one temporality.

We could designate this opening of the temporal horizon of performance art as 'distributed temporality', following Alfred Gell's notion

of the *distributed object*.⁸² As the art historian argues, in the context of Occidental aesthetics we are familiar with one form of distributed object, the oeuvre or completed works of a single artist. This way, *Constructed Situations* and *Interview Project* performances, taken together, form a temporally distributed object, which evolves over time along with the participants' interventions, affects and collective memory of the events. Also, this distributed object becomes a common reference between the participants. Moreover, this distributed object which is, as a whole, ungraspable, becomes a network between the subjects where the memory of the event is inscribed.⁸³

As Michel Foucault interestingly suggests in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, the archive is a system of simultaneously transforming past, present, and future – that is, a system for recreating a whole economy of the temporal. This same definition proposed by Foucault to describe the archive can be translated into the practice of Sehgal and Obrist. Their ‘distributed objects’ also recreate a new economy of the temporal by juxtaposing different temporalities that are continually linked by the same object. This means that their objects, over time, move closer and closer to the archive.

As also argued, *Constructed Situations* and *Interview Project* extend their works into the archive by provisioning the way in which the archival structure, that receives their work, will be transformed. This extension of their works was analyzed in the light of Lepecki and Heathfield proposal that performance may resist its actual moment and continue in its afterlife. As I tried to show, in the last chapter, both works contribute to a notion of performance as an object that is not ‘frozen’ in the present moment and, therefore, not fixed in a single space.

⁸² Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency, An Anthropological Theory*, Clarendon: Oxford, 1998, 142

⁸³ Gell quoted in Andrew Jones, *Memory and Material Culture*, University of Southampton, 2007, 21-22

This way, both underline the potentiality of performance to challenge the museum structure. But they go a step further: what they propose, is somehow “something other than performance”, since they construct a way to challenge the archive and change it from within through the elaboration of an object capable to operate and transform archival structures.

The gesture of producing an object that suggests another kind of ordering within the archival structure, and consequently in the museum, recalls Jacques Rancière’s definition of the politics of art (in opposition to political art). For Rancière, artists who participate actively in changing orders of the ‘visible, sayable and thinkable’ produce a ‘redistribution of the senses’, created through the regime of aesthetics.⁸⁴ Rancière argues that the regimes of aesthetics, as well as the political action, can re-configure and redistribute the sensible in order to create new modes of existence. In the essay *Art, Work and Politics in Disciplinary Societies and Societies of Security* (2008), Mauricio Lazzarato, in reaction to Rancière's thesis, proposes a new aesthetic paradigm. According to him, the construction of new modes of existence mediated solely by the aesthetics regime is no longer enough for means of political expression today. As he argues: “It is only possible to articulate the meaning of a situation in relation to an action undertaken to transform it.”⁸⁵ Here, the argument of Lazzarato could be related to the gesture of *Constructed Situations* and *Interview Project* of extending their object into the archive. Both works do not solely propose a new way of archiving, they invite the institutions to (more or less) radical changes in order to receive their work. Since both works, as argued, are subjected to permanent transformations as an implicit consequence of their

⁸⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du Sensible*, La Fabrique Éditions, Paris, 1998, 16

⁸⁵ Mauricio Lazzarato, “Art, Work and Politics in Disciplinary Societies and Societies of Security,” *Radical Philosophy* 149, May-June 2008, 26

structure, once they enter the realm of the institutions, they keep putting pressure on the institutions to re-evaluate their modalities of archiving.

Even where they claim to mean the opposite, aesthetic institutions in their accustomed structures tend to make us believe that what constitutes the archive is eternal, firm, solid and never ephemeral. What Sehgal and Obrist propose are archives whose function cannot be fully performed by a given institution. Their archives are constituted and operated by the memories of human beings. Through the transitory and circumstantial nature of making art they affirm the transitory and circumstantial nature of building the archive.

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Appendix

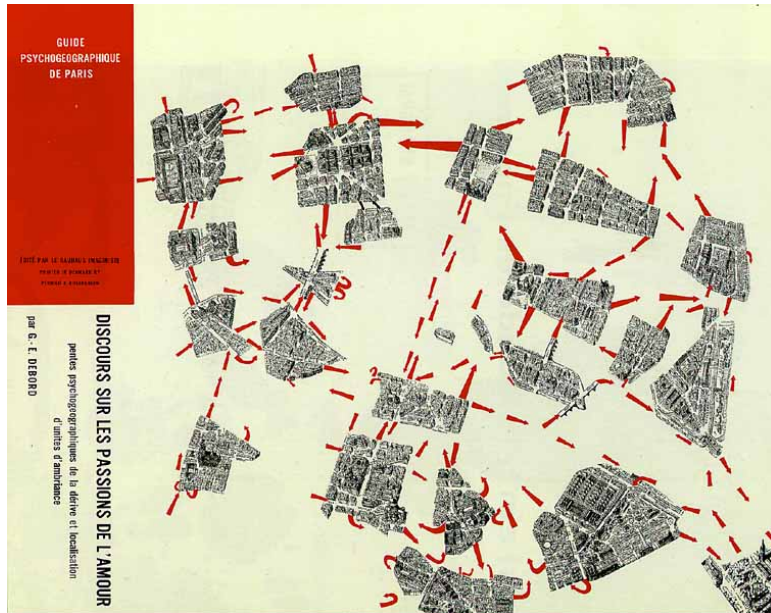


Fig. 1, example of a result of a *dérive* intervention, "Psychogeographic guide of Paris", 1995



Fig. 2, Example of a *détournement*, collage, 1962-72 (?)



Fig. 3, *These Associations*, Tate Modern, London, 2012

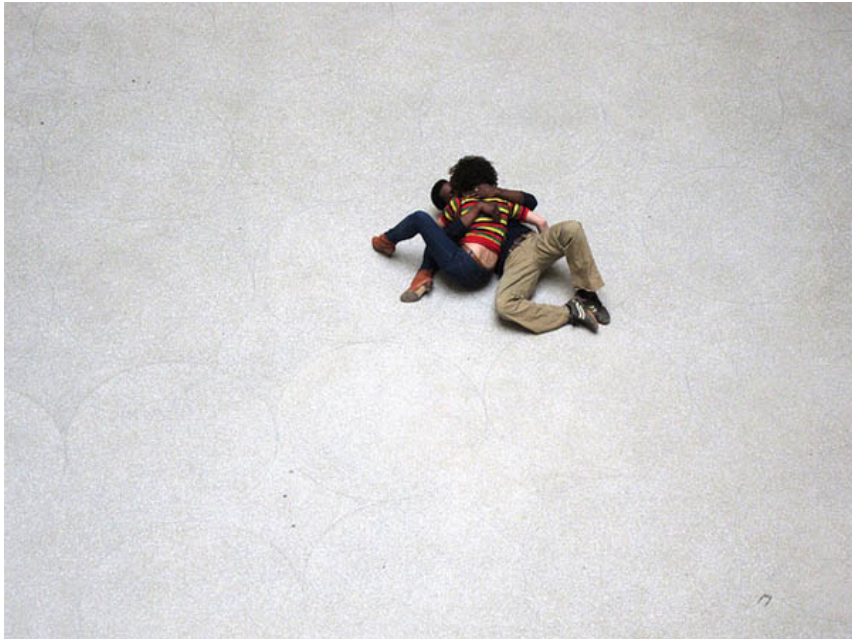


Fig. 4, *Kiss*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2007

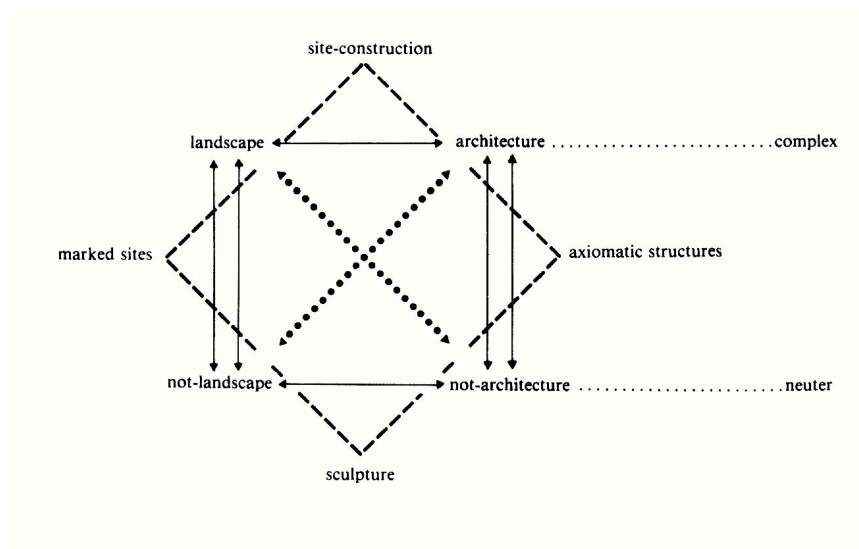


Fig. 5, Rosalind E. Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, In, *October*, n° 8, MIT Press, 1979, pp. 30-



Fig. 6, *Marathon Interviews*, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rem Koolhaas, Serpentine Gallery, London, 2007



Fig.7, Pavillon, *Interview Project*, Serpentine Gallery, 2007

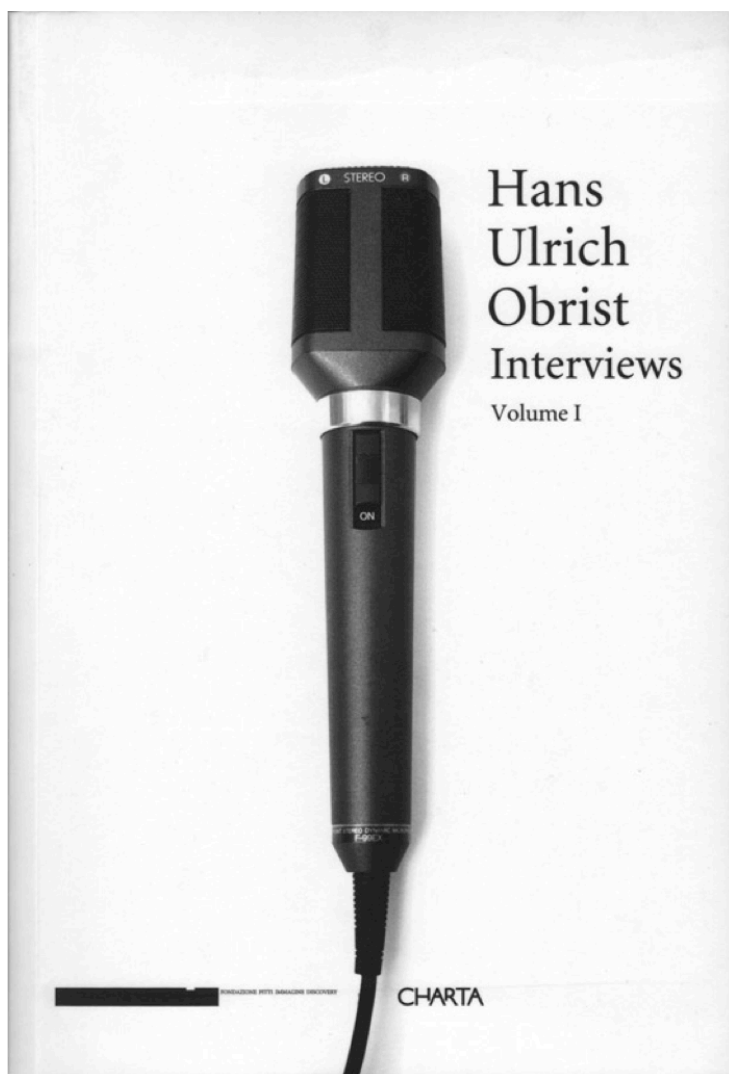


Fig. 8, Edition Volume of Interview Project